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ABSTRACT

A discussion of environmental variables in children's language development focuses on the impact on the child of his/her surroundings, and especially the adults (parents and other caregivers) with whom the child interacts. The paper reviews the related literature with attention to the following: the parents' responsibility for child language development; inborn traits of infants, especially sociability, that affect communication and language acquisition; the role of non-linguistic experience in concept formation; baby talk and "motherese" as tools for early communication; methods for promotion of adult-child communication; encouragement of imagination; the functions of imitation; variables in the home environment; the home-to-school transition; the school environment; and teachers' role in promoting communication. The importance of an adequate environment, and particularly of parental participation, in children's language development is stressed. (MSE)

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Environmental Effects on Language Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the important impact that the environment has on children's language development. The term "environment" refers to the adults and surroundings with which the children interacts. This paper does not give full details of the process of language development but concentrates on the environmental influences that produces effective language development in children. This paper stresses the importance of parental participation in children's language acquisition. Also, teachers in the school system are discussed. The effects of sufficient adult participation in children's language development are presented. Throughout this paper the term "parents' may not only refer to parents, but also to any caregivers and teachers with which the child has contact.

Environmental Effects on Language Development

The purpose of language is to be able to communicate with people. Language refers to the complex system of symbols humans use to communicate. As humans spend most of their time talking with others, language is an important aspect in life. A person's ability to speak and to use language will greatly affect his or her success. Many adults often take their linguistic abilities for granted and do not realize how complex the process of language development is. Language development requires exposure to language in order to occur. Language is developed and extended through the experiences and interactions a child encounters (Wells, 1986).

Because children learn language from those around them, sufficient adult interaction is necessary. According to the Department of Education, American mothers spend less than 30 minutes a day talking with their children, while fathers spend 15 minutes a day talking with their children (Wiener, 1988). Often parents will talk at and not with their children. Not only is the quantity, but the quality of

the parent-child conversations is important.

In today's society more children are being sent to institutions that have a more structured learning format. While structured learning formats are beneficial for children, the age of the child is an important factor to consider. According to Valerie Singer, "separating mothers from their children too early can destroy a vital bond between them" (Wiener, 1988).

Parents' Role

The parent's role in language development is to see that the child's language becomes as effective and as acceptable as possible. Parents are interpreters and translators for their children's language use. They must consistently provide necessary examples for their children's language to develop successfully. Parents must be open-minded, respectful and patient with their children, which will encourage their children to participate in language use. Problems can arise when parents are too slow to raise their level of speech. Therefore, parents must acknowledge the signs of progress and move along at

a speed which the child can follow. While parents can't speedup the rate of language development, they can enrich the understanding of language and convey a delight in using language to communicate (Ohanian and Vollmer, 1992).

Infants' Characteristics

Human infants are born with the innate drive to make sense of their experiences and surroundings. Also, infants seek out regularities in the world around them. The infants' inborn traits allow them to distinguish human voices from other sounds. The result of these inborn traits is that the infants relate to other human beings in a way that parents and other family members find very appealing (Wells, 1986).

Infants' Sociability

An important factor of language development is the infant's inherent sociability. The infant shows a clear preference for faces and face-like shapes and attempts to communicate with others. In Jerome Bruner's book Child's Talk, (1983) he states:

> It is obvious that an enormous amount of the activity of the child during the first year and

> a half of life is extraordinarily social and communicative. Social interaction appears to be both self-propelled and self-rewarding. Many students of infant behavior have found that a social response to the infant is the most powerful reinforcer one can use in ordinary learning experiments. And withholding social response to the child's initiatives is one of the most disruptive things one can do to an infant (p. 27).

The child's main incentive to learn to speak and the reason for his or her rapid progress is the satisfaction of physical needs.

Concept Formation

Non-linguistic experiences are necessary for concept formation which is necessary for normal language development. Children form concepts of the world based on what they understand. They develop an understanding of the nature of things around them before language develops. The "arranging" of early speech interaction requires routine and familiar settings, and formats, for the child to comprehend

what is going on, given his limited capacity for processing information (Bruner, 1983). Therefore, children gain valuable information when they are given the freedom to explore, to investigate and to play with things.

Baby Talk

The way parents talk to their infants can help them establish patterns that will advance the learning of vocabulary, language rules, and dialogue. Baby talk is a social tool that parents use to improve the communication and understanding between the talking partners. Parents use baby talk as a means to provide language for their infants. A special language parents use with their children is called Motherese; a high-pitched voice is used to help expand words so children can learn to say them better or more clearly (Wiener, 1988). Also, parents provide the behavior that teaches the infants the first rules for participation in a conversation: only one person speaks at a time and both will get a turn. (Holzman, 1983).

Effective Communication

Parents often respond to their infants body movements, babbles and cries as if they were intended to be meaningful and communicate meaning. As babies mature they learn what their particular acts and vocalizations are taken to mean from their parents' responses (Holzman, 1983). Babies do in time learn that their behavior affects others and that they can communicate. All children can learn to speak, but the rates that they acquire language varies. The more conversational exchanges or exposure the child experiences the faster his or her language will develop. Paula Menyuk examined 56 families and discovered that children who developed strong communication skills had parents who gave their infants time to talk and who responded to their infants' language signals. (Wiener, 1988).

Good communication is necessary for the child's language development. All communication attempts should be encouraged. Also, listening and answering questions can make an enormous difference in the emotional security of the child and will strengthen

the parent-child relationship. In Susan M. Leitch's book A CHILD LEARNS TO SPEAK: A Guide for Parents and Teachers of Preschool Children, studies show:

> that children, whose early attempts at communication are left unanswered, develop speech and language at a slower rate; the children may perceive the environment as hostile, and attempts to communicate with it will diminish (1977, p. 5).

Children need sufficient feedback to know if they are using language properly. One-on-one communication between a child and a adult is the most successful. A common perspective and mutual comprehension is necessary between the two. The adult must attempt to see the world through the child's eyes. When activities are shared they will attend the same objects and events and will interpret the situation in similar ways.

Children's Errors

During children's acquisition of language they will obviously make numerous errors.

Although children need guidance with their language, correctness should not be over-emphasized. When children are early language learners the correction of errors by the parents are useless. At this age children are merely struggling with language and will not benefit from the process. A child will figure out how the correct version fits into her sense of the way language works, a discovery she will make at her own pace (Ohanian and Vollmer, 1989). As children get older the correction of errors may be helpful, but having their errors corrected extensively can hinder their language development. Furthermore, calling the attention to correctness diverts the attention to what was said to how something was said and often diminishes the child's enthusiasm for talk (Wiener, 1988).

Parental Participation

Parental participation advances children's language development. Through the regular association of objects and their names and the use of parental reinforcement, children slowly

become members of the language community (Gibson, 1989). The discovery that "everything has a name" represents the discovery as to "what language is all about" (Britton, 1970). When parents talk to their children, read and play with them they can help their children learn to love and appreciate language.

Imagination

Parents should encourage imagination in the child's language and play. Children use imaginative language in pretending and for announcing their ambitions. Imaginative language will help expand the child's vocabulary and language abilities. When children announce their ambitions they are giving their parents insights into their minds, which can then lead to understanding and openness (Bolles, 1982). As young children play and pretend they develop their language and form inner representations of their world (Pinnell, 1980).

Imitation

Imitation plays an important role in language

acquisition. The amount and context of imitation differs in children. In James Britton's book LANGUAGE AND LEARNING, (1970) according to Piaget:

> imitation in general is linguistic improvisation: what is newly observed is used to modify behavior patterns already acquired and the child's fresh product is the outcome of that interaction (p. 43).

Young people enjoy imitating the significant people in their lives and they usually imitate behaviors that seem to be important to these people. When children imitate their parents and other significant people in their lives they are likely to gain elementary understanding of the activities they are imitating (McLane and McNamee, 1990).

Effective Conversation

Talking is a key element in a child's social and intellectual growth as well as in the child's growth in language awareness. Conversation is vital for language building and for helping

children face and deal with life's problems. An adult who helps a child understand his own language helps him move toward self-understanding (May, 1967). Language resides on the hub of self-concept; an adult who abuses a child's language abuses the personal integrity of the child. Parents can improve the child's self-concept if they take the time to communicate with the child and to teach him or her to share ideas and feelings (Brommel and Galvin, 1986).

Furthermore, the parent who takes time to talk with the child can build critical thinking and decision making skills in child that are essential for life. According to Dr. John Clabby and Dr. Maurice Elias, teaching the child to make decisions and to solve social problems develops his or her capacity to think independently (Wiener, 1988).

Home Environment

Language development requires a stable, and caring environment. Also, children often rely on familiar surroundings. The desire to

learn language must be triggered and sustained by the environment. In Maria Montessori's book The Child In The Familly, (1970) she states:

> The objects surrounding the child should look solid and attractive to him and the "house of the child" should be lovely and pleasant in all its particulars; for beauty invites activity and work...(p. 70).

Furthermore, a noisy environment increases the difficulty of language learning. Too many sounds disables the child to make sense of them and may decrease his or her concentration; therefore, the sounds causes problems with language learning.

Transition: Home to School

The transition from the home to the school environment is vital for social and emotional reasons. The style and content of learning in school is different from home. Children are expected to adjust to the new experiences and language patterns and to focus on the learning tasks in the classroom. The new environment of school should be exciting and challenging

for children. In Gordon Well's book The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn, (1986) he states:

> Children who feel unaccepted and incompetent may be slow to recover their self-confidence and as result, the ability to benefit from the school environment may be diminished or even, in extreme cases, irrevocably damaged (p. 53).

School

The school environment is usually formal and structured. School requires children to "play to a larger audience" and to be more explicit when using language (Pinnell, 1980). Wells (1986) states:

> the most important function of school is to broaden the range of children's experiences and to help them to develop sustained and deliberate attention to a topic or activity that makes more systematic learning possible (p. 53).

The language and teaching materials at school

often assume that all children have the same background, interests and language knowledge. The educational system must acknowledge and utilize both the language that was learned and the way it was learned in order to foster further language development (Pinnell, 1980).

Teachers

Teachers usually have a strong demand for correctness and tend to view errors as failures. This may result in labeling the child as lazy, slow or even disabled. In Frank B. May's book Teaching Language as Communication to Children (1986), according to Ronald Lippitt and Ralph K. White:

> the democratic leadership by the teacher encourages friendly discussion of personal matters, joking, asking opinions of each other, and suggestions on group policy has an effective impact on children's vocabulary growth. The authoritarian pattern of leadership results in either apathetic withdrawal, which hinders oral language

> practice or aggressive resistance, which channels oral language into narrow, destructive uses (p. 14).

Conclusion

In conclusion, language development is complex and must be realized by parents, teachers and society. Language development is not a passive process, but an active process. Children need guidance and support throughout their language development. An adequate environment will not only assist children in acquiring language skills, but also provides the children with effective mental and social skills.

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